

## [Myron Buxton]

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Submitted by: Seymour D. Buck - Newburyport, Mass.[?]

WPA Worker Consulted: Myron Buxton (36)

2 Orange Street

WPA Occupation: Draftsman & Asst. to Engineer

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"Yank up a chair, if you can find one. You'll see some old copies of LIFE and LOOK over on the end of the desk. Help yourself. Shove those blue prints aside, - hey, wait for a second. Hold that up, will you? Is that the one for "Ferry Wharf?" Give it here, will you? I spend half an hour earlier, trying to find that damned thing. Thanks!"

Myron Buxton grinned, and weighted the print down before him with bottles of red and blue-black ink. The yellow pencil lightly followed several of the faded lines, and he nodded. "That's more like it. How the Hell did they expect me to locate a boundary, when all the old deed gave was, " sufficient sufficient space to graze a cow and a half?" Now I've got it, - from Bartlett's warehouse ENE to the limits of Ferry Wharf, - bounded by——"

"What do you think of our WPA project headquarters?" he asked, as slim fingers tightened down on the T square, and the stark black line traveled steadily across the gray-white paper. "Used to be a horse-station Fire House," he informed. "The smell's not too bad, as long as you don't go opening the trap in the floor.

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"There's one of the recreation projects upstairs, - so that's two rent-WPA Projects, anyway. You know, they did the same thing we're doing up in Haverhill, - only they hired private engineering concern, and paid out over fifty thousand dollars to locate boundaries to city owned property along the waterfront, and around what used to be the common pastures" and like of that.

"Whole thing won't run this city much over \$600.00," he stated, "and if I do say it, the job's some mess to start in with. Shack into Salem a couple of times a week tracing back old deeds, trying to find where the Hell some old Wharf or right -of-way used to run, fifty - seventy-five, even a hundred years ago.

"Some of our landowners down around the Square are going to make some naughty noises when they find how they're owing the city rent for about forty years for land they been occupying for their lumber and coal yards, know it? Stretching over a couple of feet at a time, maybe, - until now they've encroached plenty.

"You ought to look this city over before you try to do much work on it. It used to be quite a place, you know. Back in the days of clipper ships, - and rum distilling. Boy, those old sea captains, they used to make their dough - I guess the only real difference between those privateers ana pirates was one had the grace of some paper from the President, and the other prayed to escape by the grace of God and a fast wind.

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"Just let me finish this print here, and I'll be all set. Paul's been out sick nearly two weeks, - and this isn't my strong forte, by any means. You can watch a drawing just grow as he works along on it. With me, I got to pray, when I get to the end, that the lines meet and don't pass, about three-eighths of an inch apart! Give me the leg work, outside, - I don't mind lugging the transit, and I like working out in the air. In here, I don't know, the whole place sort of closes in on you, and it's stuffy.

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"How's anybody going to settle down and do a real day's work, anyway, when they never know from one week to the next if there's going to be laid off - or if another one of those Social Service guys is going to come poking around, to see if you really do owe five hundred bucks, - and how come you're able to run a car? Hell, without my car, I'd be sunk on this job. People don't seem to figure how necessary it really is. Hop from here, four miles out to Lowe Street, maybe, - checking up on some drain locations in that new "Back Bay Sewer" set-up. Imagine it! They went ahead digging for some new lines, and started bumping into gas pipe and water mains, right and left. I don't know another city in the country'd have all that stuff laid down and no plans to show how deep down pipes were, or how they ran. Comes of not having a City Engineer. Seems almost as if all the people in this town wanted was not to be bothered with anything about the place, how it runs, or what happens, - as long as taxes aren't sky high, and they can have peace and quiet!

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"One reason people here don't like WPA is because they don't understand it's not all bums and drunks and aliens! Nobody ever explains to them that they'd never have had the new High School they're so goddam proud of if it hadn't been for PWA. They don't stop to figure that new brick sidewalks wouldn't be there, the shade trees wouldn't be all dressed up to look at along High Street and all around town, if it weren't for WPA projects. To most in this town, and I guess it's not much different in this, than any other New England place, - WPA's just a racket, wet set up to give a bunch of loafers and drunks steady pay to indulge in their vices! They don't stop to consider that on WPA are men and women who have traveled places and seen things, been educated and found their jobs folded up and nothing to replace them with. How you going to call Doc Crowley, for instance, a bum? Practiced a dentist, - and now his eyes are going bad, - think he's not damn grateful for WPA? How about these college fellows, - some of 'em on here with me, - M.I.T. graduates, - U. of Alabama - Dartmouth - Yale plenty of them can't get work, and why?

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People here'll tell you why. "The man doesn't want work, that's why. You mean to tell me an M.I.T. graduate's got to go to the WPA to make a living? I don't believe it! Drop him off, and see how quick he finds something to do. Why, I could use him, of course, I couldn't pay him what he deserves for wages, but I could hire him, anyway, so he could get by.'

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"They don't make any allowances for differences in a man's skill, or education, or whatever. Course there are men on who ought to be placed in institutions, and marked out as no-goods. Same thing holds on WPA as every other place in the world, some know guys who get them on, and that's that. Mean to say in private industry there aren't plenty who got there because they knew somebody who could say the heavenly word, "Take him?" Sure.

"I'd give a heap to be hooked up with something like the U.S. Coast & Geodetic Survey, for instance. Then you've got something ahead of you, longer than a month at a time. I'd be no dumber than plenty already on, - but I just don't know anybody to say the good word for me, see?

"This Newburyport's the last god damned place you'll ever get yourself a job, though. The people've got the money'd a damned sight rather see this just a beautiful, old-fashioned horse-and-buggy town, -without even the horse buns in the street!

"I mean it, honestly. Maple Wood Heel, - take them. When they were working night and day shifts, what happened? The poor citizens on Harris Street couldn't sleep, nights. I don't mean poor in dough, - anything but! Result? Maple Wood Heel moved out of town, - and then people squawk about high taxes. The Airport they talked of building, there's another example. The government sent aviation men up here, they surveyed the ground out back the other side of our residential High Street, - a corking sweep of flat land for miles! Pretty soon, you began to hear all kind of objections to having an airport here, even if the 6 U.S.A. was going to practically build it for them, - and there was rumor, even then,

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about what a corking training place it would make for the Army's flying kaydets! "Too much noise all the time." "Somebody might come crashing down on our heads" - no airports!

'Anybody'll tell you that Newburyport's a place all by itself, more ways than one. I don't know if it's where so many of the people marry cousins and like that, or what it is. But, so help me, the good old stock's sure gone to seed, around here."

Buxton had finished putting each silver instrument in its purple bed, carefully weighted the several sheets of paper to prevent their rolling toward the center, and now reached for his soap and towel. "Be with you in a minute. Let's get out of here. I'll show you some of the town. Take you for a ride along our famous High Street, so you can see some of the splendid examples of architectures - with weeds two yards high in the lawn, - windows all boarded up, and "For Sale" signs platered plastered all over the old houses. Christ, they can be bought for a song, but who wants to try heating 'em? Seems like some of them could be made over into damned nice two-family apartments, but you know you got to start right from scratch - plumbing, heating, wiring, - guess it's as cheap to just yank the old building down and put up modern stuff.

"Anybody in this town that can boast of a bathroom where it belongs, - in the house, - and not an old-fashioned wood-box down cellar, - honestly, this place's some town.

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"This is Federal Street, - down there's the Merrimac River. Behind us, up at the top of the rise, High Street stretches along, from one end of the city to the other. That's the real residential section - the what 'Bossy' - that's our famous ex-Mayor, you've heard about, - calls "shanty Irish," live there.

"Gambrel-roofed houses, - great big square old-timers, two and a half stories high, with Captains' Walks, - some of 'em with really beautiful cupolas, too, - the Jews'v started to get a hold there, now, though. Down the lower end, that is. You can figure on it, - another ten - maybe twenty-five years, and this whole section'll be just like down along Milk Street - filled

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up with Jews! Not only them, - there's the French-Canadians work in the shoe shops, - and boy, there's nothing spreads any faster, unless it's a forest fire, than them kind.

“Don't get the idea that I go around shooting my mouth off like this. I don't. Anybody around here who even so much as thinks about anything else how things aren't always what they seem, - then he's a “dangerous influence” - next thing to a flag-waving ‘red’! Stick you ear to the ground, - get in a visit to the Dalton Club, if you can wangle it, - you'll find out, quick enough what makes the wheels turn, - or not turn, like they got it now!

“Hell, it's life on the WPA I'm supposed to be telling about, not preaching Socialism, isn't it? O.K. I was born! Haverhill's my original starting-out-place. Went through grade and High School, - and then my career came to an abrupt halt! My father was a skilled shoe worker, - mother never was physically in good shape 8 since I was born, - in '03. That's why it seems to me there's no chance of my doing too much for her, as long as she lives! Father died, here, - and then it was up to me!

“There was good money, those days, in the shops. I used to figure everything was right with the world, - you don't think so much about injustices and inequalities, all the things that oughtn't to be, when everything's going rosy with you, know it? It's only when you get like this, - plugging on WPA never knowin when the axe will fall, - finding but how little people think of your abilities because you're stuck on WPA - then you begin to read about things, and find that all over everywhere, - there's two kinds of people, the kind on top, - and the rest, some of whom are trying to get on top, most of whom are just riding along, trying not to think about things any more than they can help.

“Well, to get back where I left off. When Maple Wood Heel moved out of town, I was stuck. Couldn't see trying to unload the house, move mother to where it was all strangers, and get another start. Ever since then, things have just gone backwards, sometimes in little slides, and again in big falls! I've got, now, so that just holding on takes all my energies, - and then some!

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"People are quick to jump you, - I'm single, - I own a car, - what the Hell do I need of WPA work? O.K. - I've got to eat, just as much as the Polack with nineteen kids, right?

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I've got a car, - sure. Registered it and paying for insurance on a monthly-payment basis. Why the car? Try lugging transits and stuff on your shoulder ten - twenty miles a day, - from one spot to another between Newbury and West Newbury and you'll see how a car fits in. Because I have to have it for the job, I'd better not try to take my mother out riding evenings, - that'd be having too good of a time, especially where the government's paying me!

"Hell, the whole thing's a laugh! The working guy in this country never had such a swell chance to get a toe-hold as he's had in the last four years! The louder the Republicans yell, the more of a toe-hold you can figure the ordinary guy's got! You talk about these WPA strikes, - trying to save their prevailing wages-rate, and save being laid-off on 30 day, - or more likely, permanent vacations without pay! Why the Hell try to lock the barn after the goddam horse's stolen? Time to make a squawk about something like the Relief Bill's before it gets onto Congress' floor. Suppose, now, - for the Hell of it, - that every single worker on WPA ahd sent one telegram to his Senator and Representative. Suppose he had brains enough to word it, maybe like this, "Insist on Recognition Right to Work Stop My Vote Counts." You think that that would have gone without making any impression? Why the Hell blame Congressmen, - they hear plenty against us, - and only about once in a year some little group - with leaders who ain't even at heart fighting for the WPA worker at all, - their interests are all centered on 10 themselves and what they're really after, - you know it, don't you? - them kind calling work-stoppages - getting all the publicity they can? Publicity like we've had only hurts like Hell!

"Somebody'd ought to really write a book on guys like us! Trouble would be to get anybody to read it. You could take and make up stories enough, twisting things around so they didn't mean that you thought they'd mean when you started the story, - but Hell, even if

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people did read about us, half that did would say, "Gee, I had no idea there were such good things done on WPA. Splendid! There surely ought to be a place in private industry for such people as are as deserving as they're made out. The rest, - well, I guess there are always going to be those kind, but they got no business making as much as I do - working forty-four hours in a shoe shop! No sirree! It can't go on forever, of course, - the government just can't find the money for it. Quicker it's all wiped out, now, the quicker we can really get business into shape again."

"No mention about real trouble with business - overproduction. No talk about how these WPA guys are going to get by until Republican leadership manages to show them there really aren't the jobs they thought there'd be, but so what? Aren't we better off than in Italy - say, - or Germany, - or, maybe, Japan?

"We got troubles enough right here in this country, not to try to help others out, right now. It beats Hell how we got to try to move battleships around and swap notes that don't mean anything, anyway between governments, trying to make this damned 11 world do differently than the real guys behind everything intend all along it shall do! You think Chamberlain's what he appears? It's not him, - Hell, the guys who run England would do the same thing with Winston Churchill, - just that the "front" would be covered up with more bombastic sounds, that's the only difference. Those guys are gambling that anything's better than letting Russia get a foothold anywhere outside of their own country, that's all. Maybe they are going to find they've gone to bed with the wrong woman, - but, when it's too late, it's too late, - that's all. Only thing is, for Christ's sake, lets us keep to Hell out of it all! I'm not holding we can lick the world, - Hell, no, - but I'm betting we can keep any enemy from ever climbing our own backs.

"Veteran, - me? Hell, no. I'm in-between! I know a lot of vets, - they're all regular guys, too. Aren't many of them who'd go do it all over again. Some, sure, - there are always some who think of it as "bang-bang - Paris whores - and vin rouge! The most of them haven't forgotten trenches, yet awhile. Let 'em go after all the damned favors they can get, I say.



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I don't begrudge 'em a thing! What the Hell, - the guys who have to pay for it are mostly those who stayed home and made the rocks, those day, right?

"I know, when you come to put your name in over to the Navy Yard, - you'll find what a difference it makes where you fit on the list, if you're a "vet," - but, at that - oh, well, - Hell!

"Women? Look, - let's skip that! I've been going with a girl for too many years to think about! She works - when she can-in the shops. Marry? She's got her mother to help out, - and I've 12 got my mother to keep going! The two don't mix, brother! Now, I've got so I just try to forget things when we're together, - and even if both of us do feel the same, - that we're letting everything go by that counts, - precious little we can do about it, right now! It's funny, too, - for spite of our being together like that all thetime, we seem to get along O.K. We don 't agree on everything, - she thinks I do too much reading about everything, - ought to just take things as they are and make the best of them, - but what the Hell?

"I'm 36, now. She's two years older than I. She's two years older than I. Americans, both of us, Native stock, too, - whatever that amounts to anymore. I ought to've been a preacher, I guess, the way I'm going on! Hell, I couldn't preach like this, though, from any pulpit. Maybe I could start one of those "whispering campaigns." D'you read that article in the Satevepost about them? How you can hire this concern to start a campaign for you, - knocking a competitor's goods, - making up a sweet lie out of whole cloth, - and plastering it from one end of the country to the other? Swell stuff, right? Wait until the old Republicans get on the receiving end of one of them, instead of taking every god damned advantage to spread everything against "F.D." they can! Boy, oh boy!

"There's one of the prettiest buildings in town. It's the Dalton Club, now. There's where the big wigs hang out nights, - playing a little poker, - talking a little talk, - and drinking a lot of drinks! It used to be the "Tristram Dalton" house back 13 in the old days, - a sweet building, too, know it? Look at those windows, - that door! There's the Newburyport of yesterday, - and it is a honey, too'. The red brick building sprawling out across the street,

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- there's "Wolfe Tavern" - "Where Your Ancestors Tarried." It's not the original building where the Tavern was, - but it's a nice example of the ancient tavern brought to life, - even to the gaudy stage-coach they keep parked out front to attract attention.

"Lets drop in the Tap Room. That's around on the Harris Street side. You won't get as big a glass of ale as down at some of the "joints" by the Square, - but the company's not quite so rambunctious, either." Buxton laughed and led the way within the marine-muraled interior of the old tap room.

"Not too bad, eh? I'd kind of like to get done in time to shoot up to the girl's house before curfew, if I can, - so here goes! You've got me born, - grown up, - single, - working on WPA. I suppose the next thing's where do we go from here? I wish to Hell somebody'd tell me! This 30-day vacation thing will tell one step, I calculate. The vets'll be down on the doorstep of City Hall waiting for the Soldiers' Relief agent! Most of the others'll be lined up on the sidewalk, filing into the Public Welfare office! As for me, what the Hell can I do? If there's anything I hate, it is to have to go down there and look for a damned grocery slip, - but I haven't got a chance of paying two weeks' bills with my check, when it does come,- and being able to finance myself more [that?] two-three days. Then what? I don't know, honestly! My names in 14 for work in the shops, - you can't even register in Boston anymore for work, they'll just look at you as if you were nuts or something! "Why," they'll say, "we can fill jobs for ten years just from the people living right here. Go back where you came from. If you can't find work there, there's certainly nothing here for you!" So it goes! You know, for a long time I didn't dare tell mother I was even on the WPA! Then, of course, when the checks came to the house in the mail, the jig was up! She felt terribly about it all, but what could we do? If I do have to hit them up for a g grocery order, - and God knows I don't know what else I can do, - then I sure hope she don't find out about it. I'm only hoping that [the?] guys that plan this Relief Act may see how foolish it is to hope to drive us into jobs don't exist, - and maybe keep us from having to go through all that damned charity business again. Hell, I feel like I earned my money, working for it! I can hold my head up, for I'm not loafing, nor trying to cheat in any way. When that's taken away, good-night!

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One thing I will say, - to you! When the city hasn't got funds to finance Public Welfare, - and they start in squawking to the state, - and then when the state finds the burden's more than they can swing, - you'll see how long it takes the old birds in Washington to realize it's government help, or else - it's only that it's too bad to make all the guys go through what they've got to, first, in order to convince Congress we're not just throwing a lot of heffer-dust about ourselves, right?

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"Cheer up. We haven't starved yet, - and we're not going to. Maybe things are all balled up, - damned little doubt of it. On the other hand, just because people around New England feel like they do, about Roosevelt and Democrats, depressions and WPA's no sign everybody does, know that, don't you, Roosevelt's started in helping farmers and them out West, - they're votes count. There's the "solid South" they talk about, - and when everybody's needing re-adjustments like today, they'll come. Only with the guys who have the money hating to part with it, - well, it comes the hard way, that's all! I live a day at a time, now, - I don't read NATION and NEW REPUBLIC much, now, - get all stirred up about everything, and can't change so much as my income two-bits, what's the use?

"If there were any way I could get the ear of somebody who had an "in" with the Coast & Geodetic, I'd give ten years of my life for a "knock-down" to them. Opportunity, - that direction, hasn't got to knowk, brother, - all it's got to do is just start to pull its hand out of its pocket ready to reach for the door, and I'll be there - waiting!

"O.K. now? Take a few days to look the town over, and you'll get a slant on it, all right. Anybody that's been anywhere, or seen anything outside the place, don't have much work to make something out of things around here. Maybe, underneath it all, there's a lot I've missed, I wouldn't be surprised. I know people are people, whether it's here or in Hoboken, N.J. Human nature's the same, too, - only it does seem's if there were an awful bunch of

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“queers” on the loose around here, that's all, and as if the “regular guys” had all taken to the woods for keeps!